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GRE

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General Essay Strategies

To write two “6” essays on the GRE in the time allotted, you need to work fast. You won’t have weeks, days, or even hours to ponder the topics and gradually craft your ideas into a masterpiece. Instead, you have to get in, give the essay graders exactly what they want, and get out. To do that, you need to have a firm essay-writing strategy in place and a solid grasp of the fundamentals of GRE essay writing before you sit down to take the test. Here they are:

- Organization: The “Three-Act Essay”
- Effective Writing Elements: The “Cast of Characters”

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Now let's see how they work.

Organization: The “Three-Act Essay”

As you write your essays, keep in mind your purpose and your audience: Your purpose is to get a high score, and your audience is the GRE essay graders. Remember too that all the graders expect from you is that you write two strong first drafts; they don't expect the kind of carefully crafted prose and arguments found in polished work.

The most successful essays on the GRE follow a set formula, which we refer to as the three-act essay. Many of you will be already familiar with this formula from years of writing five-paragraph essays in high school and college:

Act	Also Known As	Number of Paragraphs	Purpose
I	Introduction	One	Set the stage
II	Body paragraphs	Three	Tell the story
III	Conclusion	One	Wrap it up

In the same way that a three-act play tells a story, a three-act essay begins by setting the stage for the argument to come (Act I), then makes the argument over three body paragraphs (Act II) using reasons and evidence, and finally concludes by wrapping up the argument (Act III). You'll use this structure, with a few modifications, for both the Issue and the Argument essays.

Let's see how the three-act essay structure works by practicing with an Issue essay topic:

“We can learn more from conflicts than we can from agreements.”

Act I: Set the Stage

Quite literally, the first act of a play sets the stage for the drama to follow. It grabs the audience's attention, introduces key plot elements and characters, and prepares the audience for the rest of the play. Act I of your GRE essay (aka your first paragraph, or the introduction) accomplishes virtually the same tasks.

Act I of your GRE essays should include the following:

- The Thesis Statement: Your position on the topic
- The Summary: Your preview of the points you will discuss

To accomplish these goals, you need at least four sentences in your introduction. These sentences need to convey your thesis statement and the overall structure of your essay to the grader. The thesis statement is usually one sentence, and each of the three points you'll discuss in the body paragraphs also gets at least one sentence.

The Thesis Statement. The thesis statement should be the first sentence of your essay. It

summarizes your position on the topic and grabs the reader's attention by clearly explaining what the essay's going to argue.

Take a look at the following thesis statement:

Although agreements have value, the juxtaposition of different ideas in a conflict inevitably leads to more significant progress and evolution. This thesis statement clearly takes a stand on the issue presented by the topic. It's fluid but not fancy. It's grammatically correct but doesn't include clause after clause or comma after comma. It uses a few big words (juxtaposition, significant, inevitably), but the words aren't so big that you'd need a dictionary to understand them.

The Summary. After the thesis statement, the rest of your introduction should summarize the three points that will form your body paragraphs. This summary lets the essay graders know how you'll structure your essay. You need to explain and describe your three points to show how they fit into your argument. Make sure to give each main point its own sentence. Here's an example:

Although agreements have value, the juxtaposition of different ideas in a conflict inevitably leads to more significant progress and evolution. What scientific progress would we have, for example, if it weren't for intellectual debate? None—intellectual debate leads to scientific progress. The reformation of outdated political ideas and concepts is also marked by struggle. Finally, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “What doesn't kill us makes us stronger.” This quotation captures the sentiment that personal growth arises from conflict.

These short sentences have summarized the three main points persuasively and effectively, and the paragraph includes a quotation from a famous German philosopher to boot. The paragraph is organized and focused, and it presents three thoughtful examples. It also includes sentence variety, as well as active verbs to demonstrate the facility of language essay graders want to see in a “6” essay. Also, as you will see, the intro paragraph (Act I) presents its points in the same order that they appear in Act II.

Act II: Tell the Story

This is where things get interesting, because it's here, in your three body paragraphs, that you'll actually make the essay's argument. These paragraphs provide clear, thoughtful evidence for your thesis by explaining your examples. The directions for both the Issue and Argument essays say it loud and clear: Organize, develop, and express your ideas and Support your critique with relevant reasons and examples. Act II is where you'll do all of this.

As such, each of your three Act II paragraphs should include:

- The Topic Sentence: The thesis statement of the paragraph
- The Evidence: The specific, concrete facts, phenomena, events, quotes, or situations that

support your overarching thesis statement

The Topic Sentence. Each body paragraph should begin with a topic sentence. It might help to imagine your body paragraphs as three mini-arguments, each with its own thesis statement, examples, and explanations. Taken together, these mini-arguments add up to form your essay's main argument. The thesis statement of your body paragraph is the topic sentence, or the first sentence of your paragraph. Here you'll explain what the paragraph's about and how it links to your essay's main argument. Let's look at an example:

First, historically, scientific progress has been inspired by conflicts of ideas.

This topic sentence succinctly summarizes the paragraph's point: Scientific progress is a great example of the benefits of conflict (which supports the essay's main claim about conflict from Act I). The word first shows focus and organization; it also shows a progression of ideas, because first lets us know that other paragraphs will follow.

The Evidence. Each Act II paragraph must provide evidence to make the essay graders believe your thesis; this evidence forms the backbone of your argument. The essay graders want to see that you're capable of making a logical argument in both the Issue and Argument essays. Good reasons make readers believe in your argument. You'll need several sentences in each body paragraph to develop your examples and provide evidence for that paragraph's claim. For now we're just going to show you one Act II paragraph. As we continue through the essay chapters, you'll see several more. Your GRE essays should have three body paragraphs.

First, historically, scientific progress has been inspired by conflicts of ideas. In the sixteenth century, for example, a great debate arose because Copernicus vehemently challenged the notion that the earth is the center of the solar system. Although he paid a price both socially and politically for this remonstrance, Copernicus disabused a long-held belief, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Church and to other astronomers of his day. Because of this conflict, humankind eventually gained a new understanding of astronomy.

This paragraph uses the specific, astute example of Copernicus and his work on the solar system to prove its position: Copernicus's ideas caused lots of problems back in the day, but ultimately his theories proved correct and thus advanced our understanding of astronomy.

Act III: Wrap It Up

We've all been to a play or movie that leaves its audience hanging. Maybe it did so to entice you to watch the sequel, or maybe it was one of those movies that's deliberately confusing and ambiguous so that you can think about it for days afterward. Regardless of your feelings about such plays and movies, leaving essay graders hanging is a great way to lose a few points on your essay score. Do not go all artsy and forget to include a conclusion in your essay.

Act III, the fifth and final paragraph of your essay, should summarize and broaden the points you made in Act II. Your conclusion should be a few sentences long and finish your argument. Act III of your GRE essay should:

- Recap your essay
- Expand your position

Recap. The recap is a summary of what you've already argued. As in the thesis statement, the recap should be straightforward, bold, and declarative. Here's a recap example:

Clearly, conflict has been responsible for several upward surges of humankind in diverse respects. In the areas of science, politics, and individual character, progress requires struggle.

Expand. The last two or three sentences of the essay should take the ideas you just recapped and push them a little further. One of the best ways to push your argument further is to look to the future and think about what would happen if the position that you've taken in your essay could be applied on a broader scale or to a broader field, such as politics or art. Take a look at these sentences:

Rather than avoiding conflict at all costs, we should accept conflict as a necessary—and beneficial—part of the human condition, whether the conflicts arise among scholars or states. Conflict permits true transformation and growth.

The essay discussed scholars in its first Act II paragraph about Copernicus. Although the essay hasn't discussed the relative pros and cons of conflicts that arise among countries in our essay, it implies that the argument would hold for such a discussion. (Would it? Sure . . . look at the way the United Nations rose from the ashes of World War II.) And that's what you want to do when you expand your position: Imply how your argument could apply to another field or situation.

ACT III wraps up the entire GRE essay. It says to your essay grader, "I hope you enjoyed the show."

Effective Writing Elements: The "Cast of Characters"

Characters bring a play to life and make it worth watching. Similarly, a great GRE essay needs interesting, effective writing elements to make it worth reading. We call these elements characters to keep with our three-act essay idea, but it doesn't matter what you call them. All that matters is that you include these elements in your GRE essays:

- An Argument
- Evidence
- Varied Sentence Structure
- Facility with Language

These are, quite literally, the stars of your play. Don't even think about writing your GRE essays without them.

An Argument

This one's a biggie: The test makers want to see your ability to develop an argument in both the Issue and the Argument essays. On that note, your argument must be related to the topic. You cannot freestyle your way into the grader's good graces; you must address the topics given to you. Save the creativity for the way you develop and support your examples.

To make an argument, you need to take a stand and then provide and develop enough evidence to support it. Your thesis statement lets readers know where you stand and what you're going to argue. Take a look again at the thesis statement we've been using throughout this section:

Although agreements have value, the juxtaposition of different ideas in a conflict inevitably leads to more significant progress and evolution.

We're saying that when it comes to making progress, conflicts are more helpful than agreements. So, on the issue of whether we learn more from conflicts or agreements, we're coming down firmly on the side of conflicts. Now we'll spend the rest of the essay developing examples that support that stand.

Evidence

To write a "6" essay, you've got to load it up with thoughtful examples—or evidence that shows why your argument is sound. In the Issue essay, your examples can come from any source, including personal experience, academic knowledge, and current events. In the Argument essay, however, your evidence will come from the argument topic provided by the test makers. Not to worry: In the upcoming chapters, we'll discuss the five steps to a "6" Issue essay and the five steps to a "6" Argument essay.

Let's say you're trying to think of examples to support the position that "struggle is a required element for progress." Perhaps you come up with the example of scientific progress. Okay. That's a potentially great example. To actually make it great, though, you have to be able to say more than just "Conflict leads to scientific progress." You need to be specific: Give dates; mention specific people, theories, or facts.

Just as bricks hold up a building, such detailed facts support an argument. There are literally dozens of good, potential examples for every position you might choose. Your job is to choose examples that prove your essay's argument. The test makers instruct their graders to look for "appropriate and insightful examples," which demonstrate a "powerful and interesting position on the topic."

For instance, knowing that Copernicus was part of the debate about the solar system is a good start, but it's not enough to prove the essay's main argument (the juxtaposition of

different ideas in a conflict inevitably leads to more significant progress and evolution). How did Copernicus or the conflict surrounding his ideas lead to progress? This is where the detail comes in:

In the sixteenth century, for example, a great debate arose because Copernicus vehemently challenged the notion that the earth is the center of the solar system. Although he paid a price both socially and politically for this remonstrance, Copernicus disabused a long-held belief, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Church and other astronomers of his day. This example demonstrates a thorough understanding of the controversy surrounding Copernicus. It provides dates and a broad outline of the ideas that led to the controversy. It shows thought and careful consideration, and it helps prove the essay's main argument.

To prove the position that conflict leads to progress, you might choose one example from science, politics, and personal experience. Here are three examples that you might choose from those areas:

- Science. Copernicus's challenge to the idea that the earth was the center of the solar system
- Politics. The abolition of slavery
- Personal experience. Hardships leading to personal growth

A broad array of reasons and support provides a more solid and defensible position than three examples drawn from personal experience or from just one or two areas. If you derive relevant points from diverse examples, your Act II will be nothing short of a "6"—that is, if you also include the other two writing elements that round out our Cast of Characters.

Varied Sentence Structure

Take a look at the following paragraph:

Sentence structure is very important. Sentence structure, if appropriately varied, can keep your readers engaged and help make your essay exciting and easier to read. Sentence structure, if it is monotonous and unchanging, can make your essay sound boring and unsophisticated. Sentence structure is important on the GRE essay. Sentence structure is also important in essays you write for school. Are you crying yet? That's because every sentence not only started in the same way but also all had the same straight-ahead plodding rhythm. Sentence structure is . . . Sentence structure can . . . That's about as original as roses on Valentine's Day.

Now take a look at the sample Act II paragraph on Copernicus. Notice how the various sentences start differently and also have different internal rhythms.

Historically, scientific progress has been inspired by conflicts of ideas. In the sixteenth century, for example, a great debate arose because Copernicus vehemently challenged the notion that the earth is the center of the solar system. Although he paid a price both socially and politically for this remonstrance, Copernicus disabused a long-held belief, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Church and other astronomers of his day. Because of this conflict, humankind eventually gained a new understanding of astronomy.

These variations in sentence structure keep the writing vibrant and interesting. As you write your essay, focus on changing the structure of your sentences. You don't have to invert every clause, but you should be careful not to let a few sentences in a row follow the same exact structure. You've got to mix it up. Here's the boring first paragraph of this section rewritten with varied sentence structure:

Sentence structure is very important. Varying the structure of your sentences keeps your reader engaged; it also makes your writing easier—and more exciting—to read. Monotonous, repetitive sentence structure can make your essay sound boring and unsophisticated. Practice mixing up your sentence structure on the essays for the GRE, but don't forget to also vary your sentence structure on the application essays you write for graduate school!

Much easier to read and far less repetitive, right? Right.

Keep It Simple. Sometimes test takers think writing long complicated sentences will impress professors. Maybe, but it won't impress GRE essay graders. Be varied in your sentence structure, but also remember to make sure your sentences make sense. Complex sentences can be difficult to understand, and your GRE essays should be as clear and easy to read as possible.

We could fill an entire book with rules about creating simple and succinct prose. Instead, here are two handy rules to simplify the sentences that you write on test day:

1. Never write a sentence that contains more than three commas. Try to avoid sentences with more than two commas (unless you need to include a list).
2. Never write a sentence that takes up more than three lines on the screen.

Those rules are certainly not foolproof, but abiding by them will keep you from filling your essays with overly complex sentences. Ultimately, these rules will make your essays easier to understand, which will please your essay graders and, hopefully, help you get a higher score.

Transitions. Transitions let readers understand the flow of your argument. They're words, phrases, and sentences that take readers gently by the hand, leading them through your essay. Here are some different kinds of transitions you can use to spice up your

sentence structure:

- Showing contrast. Katie likes pink nail polish. In contrast, she thinks red nail polish looks trashy.
- Elaborating. I love going to the movies. Even more than that, I love eating popcorn and candy in the dark while I'm there.
- Providing an example. If you save up your money, you can afford pricey items. For example, Patrick saved up his allowance and eventually purchased a sports car.
- Showing results. Manuel ingested nothing but soda and burgers every day for a month. As a result, he gained ten pounds.
- Showing sequence. The police arrested Bob at the party. Soon after, his college applications were all rejected, and eventually Bob drifted into a life of crime.

Your first Act II paragraph probably dives right into its thesis statement, but the second and third Act II paragraphs need transitions. The simplest way to build these transitions is to use words like first and second. That means you'll essentially number your three Act II paragraphs as first, second, and third or finally.

A slightly more sophisticated way to build transitions is to choose examples from different sources, such as from politics and personal experience. If the first paragraph is about a political instance of learning from failure and the second concerns a personal encounter with conflict from your own experience, make that fact your transition: As in politics, conflict leads to personal growth. For example, once I . . .

But you also want to use transitions within paragraphs as a way of varying your sentence structure and aiding the logical flow of your ideas.

Facility with Language

As the chart at the beginning of this chapter indicates, a "6" essay "demonstrates a facility with language through the use of descriptive and appropriate vocabulary." However, that does not mean that you have to use tons of sophisticated vocabulary words to score well. Don't submit to a compulsion to evidence your estimable and irrepressible loquaciousness in an endeavor to astonish your future academic compatriots into acknowledging the vital, indisputable, and inevitable advisability of acceding to your fervent desire to obtain entrance to their graduate-level institution.

In other words, avoid sentences like that—it sounds pretentious and increases the risk that you and your logic will get lost in the wordiness. Use language that's appropriate to make your case. Avoid overly complex sentences, and don't get carried away with flowery embellishments. You don't have enough time to create the next Great American Masterpiece, but you do have enough time to construct clear and persuasive essays. Use the vocabulary you have to the fullest, but don't try to squeeze in big words that you may not know how to use correctly.

Let's look again at the paragraph about scientific progress:

First, historically, scientific progress has been inspired by conflicts of ideas. In the sixteenth century, for example, a great debate arose because Copernicus vehemently challenged the notion that the earth is the center of the solar system. Although he paid a price both socially and politically for this remonstrance, Copernicus disabused a long-held belief, much to the chagrin of the Catholic Church and other astronomers of his day. Because of this conflict, humankind eventually gained a new understanding of astronomy.

This paragraph is a great illustration of how to use words effectively. Both remonstrance and disabused are advanced words, and, more important, they're used appropriately. Sophisticated vocabulary used in the proper context is what makes for excellent word choice.

Compelling Word Choice. Here's a suggested list of some words that you may want to use as you write your GRE essays. These words can be effective and impressive-sounding synonyms for words you probably already know.

Use . . .	Instead of . . .
albeit (adv.)	even if
connote (v.)	mean
conversely (adv.)	but
corroborate (v.)	support or strengthen
depict (v.)	show
dire (adj.)	urgent
emblematic (adj.)	an example of, symbolic
hence (adv.)	so
heretofore (adv.)	until now
highlight (v.)	show
implication (n.)	suggestion
majestic (adj.)	great
paramount (adj.)	important
symbolize (v.)	demonstrate

Proper Grammar and Spelling. A few grammar or spelling mistakes sprinkled throughout your essay will not destroy your score. The test makers understand that you're bound to make minor mistakes in a rushed 30- or even 45-minute essay.

Although essay graders will sympathetically ignore a few mistakes here and there, they definitely will not ignore patterns of errors. If a grader sees that your punctuation is consistently wrong, that your spelling of familiar words is often incorrect, or that you write run-on sentences again and again, your score will suffer.

In other words, you should proof your essays. It's better to spend another thirty seconds

or so to change a word or a sentence than to potentially lose points for having too many errors.

Quotations. One way to distinguish your essay from the sea of thousands of similar essays is to include a relevant quote. Prior to test day, memorize a handful of widely applicable quotes from a source, such as Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, on big topics such as love, success, and life. Then, when you're writing the essays, look for an opportunity to include one of these quotes.

Limit yourself to one quote per essay. After all, it's supposed to be your essay, so it shouldn't seem like you're merely regurgitating the words of others. Because people tend to remember first and last impressions best, try if you can to place your quote in either the introduction or the conclusion of your essay.

A quotation isn't necessary to get a "6," but it may help add spice and flavor to your prose.

Okay, one last important note before we get to our in-depth treatment of the individual GRE essay types in the following two chapters.

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